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ABSTRACT

Public dissatisfaction with school boards, which started building in the 1980s with the publication of "A Nation At Risk," is now evidenced by calls for national standards and accountability measures. This paper presents an overview of the changing school board and how some boards have reformed themselves. The paper discusses ways in which legislative initiatives and court decisions threaten the traditional role of school boards and the administration. It describes school-board reforms suggested by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Governors' Association and situations in which boards have been replaced. In some cases state takeover of boards has been due to mismanagement or charter schools that weakened boards' authority. Problems with traditional school boards include frequent member turnover, isolation from government entities that provide social services, individual members' agendas, and isolation from the realities of schools. The paper highlights situations in which the school board was replaced with a business board (Chicago School District) or with school-site councils (Kentucky and Boston). School boards must retrain, reform, and redirect efforts to produce stability within school districts; utilize action research and strategic planning in order to improve student achievement and behavior; and develop coherent agendas centered around the achievement of all students and an effective evaluation system. Contains 17 references. (LMI)

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New School Governance: The School Board and Its Future

by

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In what has become an American tradition, school boards composed of duly elected citizens are the guardians of and policy makers for our nation's schools at the district level. Born of the New England tradition of the town council and the rough community decision making of the emerging west, the role of the citizen arbiter of education is jealously guarded in most sections of the country. Of course, the term "most" is used because in some states, board are appointed by other bodies such as the mayor or city council. Indeed, in some communities, the city council and the school board are one and the same.

For approximately a century, since the creation of the first school board in the early nineteenth century, the public and politicians alike have been relatively happy with the governance of the boards in the various school districts. Of course, these boards, whether elected or appointed were composed of the leaders in the community. Most board members were elected at large thereby diminishing the politics of elections and helping to assure that individual board members represented the entire district. Additionally, the fact that boards were elected or selected from the district population gave some comfort to community citizens that their views with regard to education would be represented. Consequently, absent problems in the school district, most citizens were content.

Dissatisfaction and Demands

In the 1980's however, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), many thoughtful citizens began to question not only the function and focus of schools and school districts but also the caliber and knowledge of the school boards that governed them. "Dissatisfaction with public services, including education, has led to the demand for a closer match between consumer tax

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payments and how that revenues is spent (Steiner, 1994, p. 5). Nationally, this dissatisfaction has been evidenced in the call for national standards and testing to take accountability out of the hands of local authorities.

In various states, including Arkansas, this dissatisfaction has been evidenced in the passage of legislation mandating not only a set of standards with regard to curriculum to be offered but also state mandated curriculum outcomes for students. Accompanying these demands have been calls for charter schools, vouchers, home schooling and choice. All such calls reflect the ongoing concern of the public relative to the education provided by schools and the leadership in central office administration and by school boards. Site management too has been a demand often heard in the 1980's. The idea of school site management is to permit the ... "professional greater control in providing a proper education for students under their care." (Baldwin, 1993, p. 1.) In seeking greater school site management, states such as Indiana have passed legislation which allows schools to seek a waiver of any rule adopted by the school board. The legislature is not the only external entity which has attempted to address perceived needs in American education however.

The Legislature and the Courts

As legislators, state departments of education, and school districts have become increasingly engaged in administering standardized tests to students and demanding teacher accountability in order to address perceived deficits in students learning and in American education generally, other governmental bodies have become involved in schooling as well. More and more, the courts are stepping in to define the role of the school board and the powers of school administrators.

Such court involvement in the 1960's and 1970's seemed to be limited to desegregation, school finance and student and teacher rights. In current cases, the courts are ruling on issues such as the use of standardized testing in states and school districts, issues which had been supposed generally to be within the purview of school boards and state legislatures. The Florida case, *Debra P. v Turlington*, 474 F. Supp. 244 (M. D.. Fla., 1979) is an excellent example of such judicial behavior. Lerner, B. in Bunzel, 1985). The problem is, of course, that federal judges are not generally educators and consequently do not have reason to understand the parameters within which educators operate. Neither are they citizens of a school or district with a vested interest in the achievement of those students within the district. If the question for

consideration is neither constitutional or criminal, this trend in judicial decision making may represent a direct threat to the traditional governance role of the school boards and school administration. Of course, individuals filing suit generally seek either to prevent particular educational policy choices from being implemented or to place school boards and school districts in a position where particular policy must be adopted. Such suits are generally brought under the 14th amendment. By bringing arguments into federal court, questions of educational soundness of programs are being addressed by jurists who should limit their address to constitutional issues. (Lerner in Bunzel, p. 183). Simultaneously, these jurists unwittingly are eroding the traditional system of public school governance in the United States. They are also validating the suspicions which some Americans harbor relative to the quality of American education in light of the several reports and books written in the 1980's concerning the shortcomings of our educational institutions.

Changes and Visions of Change

In light of ongoing discussion relative to the quality of our schools, cities, states and educators themselves have suggested and are suggesting major reforms. As early as 1988, superintendents whose districts had participated in the innovation pilots jointly sponsored by the United States Department of Education and the National Governors' Association were recommending change. Among their reforms which they suggested were:

- The establishment of National School Board Academies to train present and future school board members.
- That federal, state and local authorities encourage well-qualified citizens to seek board positions in order to guide change.
- That federal, state and local policy makers allow districts and individual schools that meet agreed upon standards to be exempt from some laws and regulations.
- Partnerships with businesses and higher education be strengthened and increased.
- That the United States Department of Education create a study group to identify indicators of school effectiveness. (Paulu, 1988).

Although these suggestions do not propose actual changes in school board governance, they do portend significant interventions which have the

potential to alter the role and independence of school boards in several significant ways including, but not limited to financial and curricular decision making.

Individuals like Seymour Sarason, a professor emeritus at Yale University, has been calling for the dissolution of school boards for years. In a recent work, *Parental Involvement and the Political Principle* he argues that "it's time to abolish local boards of education and replace them with local education assemblies in which anyone who's going to be affected by a decision... has a hand in the decision - making process (Harrison, 1996, p. 36). Sarason's proposal is not without a thoughtful basis. Among his goals are the reconnection of parents with schools, not as guests on campus but rather as full partners. Another suggested merit of this proposal is that there would not be individual agendas, such as those which some board members who are elected from constituencies, may have. Rather communication among parents and school administrators would be open and direct. Additionally, it is Sarason's contention that many school boards operate on myths concerning that which schools are about. In other words, board members are not in the schools regularly and may not even have children in schools. Consequently, information which they may have relative to schools may be filtered through layers of bureaucracy or may be derived from press reports or media sound bytes.

The Cincinnati, Ohio school board has taken recent tax levy defeats to heart and in an attempt to improve and recover from bankruptcy, it has hired a new superintendent from within and engaged the business community in a task force which examined every facet of school district functions and management. The report issued by this task force called for changing the district into an organization focused on individual schools and administered by professional managers. It also called for creating mini-districts which would pilot possible reforms, privatizing custodial staff, and merit pay. (Effron, 1996).

Although the board continues to function in Cincinnati as the policy making entity, it is clear that by virtue of its invitation to the business community that much of its power was given at least for a time, to an external entity. If the current reform efforts in Cincinnati do not work one wonders whether the board will continue to function or if the business community and community as a whole will seek to replace the board with business

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professionals who may be viewed as better able to do the job of managing a complex school district.

Board Replacements: A Reality

Board replacements are not a dream or even just a possibility. There are situations in which such action is being taken or has already been taken in an attempt to improve public education. The state of New Jersey is poised to take over the Newark School District thereby displacing the board as the governing body. This is predicated on mismanagement in the district and failure to adequately support classroom activities and student learning with funds which were kept in central office or allegedly wasted. Although the school board is fighting the state move, it seems likely that the takeover will occur.

In other states including Arkansas it is not only the charter school which can blunt or negate the school board's authority. Loss of board authority is inherent in the proposed state take over of districts which are either in financial or academic distress and which are unable to remedy that situation within a legally mandated time period.

Some districts and school boards have turned their schools over to private entities not solely for the purpose of divesting themselves of the responsibility for transportation or custodial work, but for the purpose of running the entire district. Hartford, Connecticut and Baltimore, Maryland did this by hiring E.A.I. In a few places, the Edison project, the idea of Chris Whittle, is operative. Still other management corporations which belief that a profit may be made, school facilities improved and achievement raised, wait in the wings for the opportunity to prove that private sector savvy is superior to professional expertise when it comes to educating children.

The Other Side

Jerry McBeath argues in the October 4, 1995 issue of Education Week that school boards are worth keeping. He notes that some boards do micro manage and that some boards are relatively unproductive (p. 37). However, it is his contention that boards have long been advocates for students and teachers and that boards tend to help districts produce the kind of governance system which the community desires.

Thomas A. Shannon (1994), the executive director of the National School Boards Association, believes that school boards are our best hope for future reform. he cites the fact that elections and changes in board membership are a basis for the continual development of new ideas. He also states that changes

in membership can assist in the movement toward school improvement. Shannon does suggest, however, that boards must "reach out further into the community and bring local citizens into more immediate and active participation in the formulation of educational policy." (p. 390).

An assertion such as this quotation from Shannon receives additional credence when one considers that in Oregon there is currently a push for a law to place the decisions as to curriculum, texts, and school programs into the hands of parents rather than leaving it with the school board. Although the law does not specifically state that power will be taken from the school board, it does suggest that parents will be the determiners of their students texts, curriculum and programs. What other conclusion may be drawn? If the law passes in Oregon, we may be fairly certain that other states will soon contemplate similar laws. Such laws, in themselves, will significantly limit the powers of the district administrators and of the school board.

Problematically, however, through most educators and citizens in general can argue about what school boards ought not to do, there is little agreement concerning what they ought to do. (Campbell & Greene, 1994). Absent a hard and fast definition of what school boards should do, board members and consequently school districts face change and board members face replacement in their communities as they attempt to improve education in light of even increasing criticism and comparisons of their students' achievement with that of students in other nations.

Current Changes

In West Virginia, the state School Boards Association is seeking to train school boards as "corporate governing bodies." The language of the private sector is clear in this terminology. A corporate governing body is not the traditional design of a school district board of directors.

In an article entitled "Wrong Questions Lead to Misdirected Answers", Gail Stephens (1993) remarked that " I am no longer certain that we can advantageously sustain the clear divide between policy and administration functions in the complex systems we call school districts." (p. 10) Today's school board which may combine both functions does in fact represent a new model not unlike the corporate board.

While the elected board has been the life blood of democratic education, the frequent turnover of board members can lead to position changes, i.e. changes in top administration and principals based on board agendas and

consensus. "It is not a certainty (but) there is a growing awareness that frequent board turnover of administrative leadership is not a stimulus for positive change." (Soult & Shannon, 1993, p. 35).

Viteritti (1986) raised precisely this issue when he wrote that the "contemporary model of school system governance is a product of tradition." (p. 228) He went on to note however that it is not a good organizational model for it is predicated on a unitary community apart from politics which is focused on a coherent set of goals and an agenda predicated on public consensus. Absent the goals and public consensus, it is his opinion that the school board and usually as currently constituted "violates both the normative principles of public administration and fundamental values of American government." (p. 229). He suggests that in lieu of a school board as currently constituted, the implementation and policy making functions should be joined in the functioning of one entity.

In an article published in the Kappan in 1994, Usdan suggested that "there is growing evidence as the 21st century approaches that we may once again need to assess our basic structure for educational governance." (p. 374) He suggests that school boards and other governmental entities are too isolated from each other and that schools have been called upon to deal with issues well beyond the educational purview. It is his suggestion that perhaps collaborative leadership within the community and at the local level is a solution.

In fact, the Chicago School District has replaced the school board with a business board. There is still a superintendent who manages the daily operations of the district but real authority relative to curriculum and programming is resident with school councils. The business board, really a board of trustees, oversees the large financial interests of the district and addresses issues such as facilities maintenance, strategic planning relative to transportation, facilities, bonding and other general business functions. The mayor of the city appoints the members of the business council while the school site council members are selected from school site constituencies. The board of trustees oversees the work of the superintendent.

Site based management is the general rule of thumb. This structure was the result of the 1988 School Reform Act. Via this act, much of the administrative authority and policy making is in the hands of the school site councils. Kentucky and Boston too use school site councils to plan with and for

school staffs and student achievement. Although it may be too soon to call such innovations a trend, it is at least a direction in which many urban districts are going in order to facilitate community stake holder involvement and to bring about change and improved student achievement.

With decision making authority relative to school operations and policy moving into other hands, the board and the superintendent must change their approaches and willingness to collaborate with schools and community government or face an uncertain future. (Lindle, 1995/1996) (Gleason, S. C., Donohue, N. & Leader, G. C., 1995/1996). Saks (1990) contends that the future may be predictable because boards have "abrogated their responsibility in the curriculum area" (p. 31) and states have had to move in to fill the void. This is but one more example of the erosion of the position of school boards.

The jury is still out but the persistent calls for reform and accountability do not bode well for school boards unless and until the boards themselves retrain, reform and redirect efforts at producing stability within districts, utilizing action research and strategic planning for the purpose of improving student achievement and behavior. If they are to survive, boards must have a coherent agenda centered around the achievement of all students and an evaluation system which clearly tells them whether or not the schools are succeeding.

The board as an institution can no longer sit in judgment and wait for schools and teachers to reform on their own nor can it assume that because its members are elected or appointed in a political process they answer only to a constituency. The stakes are too high and the problems too great. The survival of American public education, the great democratic experiment, may depend in large part on the educational and governance decisions that are made by communities today.

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